

**Appropriations Committee
Human Services Subcommittee
February 23, 2022**

**Public Hearing on:
House Bill 5037 AAC the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30th, 2023
(Department of Children and Families)**

Good evening, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Miner, Representative France and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Sherry Albert, I am the Chief Operating Officer at Community Solutions, Inc., we operated two programs for DCF. LISA's Wish and LISA's SAIL programs

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the state budget.

I want to thank you for the 4% Cost of Living Adjustment for community nonprofits that you fought to include in last year's budget. I'm here tonight to ask you to honor the long-term plan to address underfunding of community nonprofits and fund services by \$461 million over five years – or an additional 8% in Fiscal Year 2023.

Without it, we risk destabilizing our state's community service delivery system which has been upended by the pressures of COVID-19 and an exponential increase in the need for service in our communities. At the same time, we're facing unprecedented challenges recruiting and retaining staff of all skill levels and salaries.

We have vacancies that have lasted over a year that we have been unable to fill despite expanding our use of social media sites, professional organizations and expensive advertising in publications designed to reach diverse audiences. As well we have had many people offered jobs which they deny based on salary. Typically salaries are off by 5-10K which leaves no room whatsoever to negotiate. In addition, there have been many weeks or months where we get 0 applicants. The jobs are much harder than giving out a latte at Starbucks as we deal with young people who have serious behavioral, mental health and substance use issues. Add to that, these programs are 24/7/365 so the work also needs to be done on evenings, weekends and holidays. The salary, particularly post covid is simply not enough to retain or recruit staff as most jobs in the workforce including, Homegoods, Target and Dunkin Donuts generally pay more and require far less in terms of qualifications.

Human services are now in competition for staff with companies like Amazon and Walmart that require no specialized training, are paying more and offering more hiring incentives. Clinical staff are being lured away by lucrative offers from school districts and telehealth companies. Across the state, The Alliance found that 18%, nearly 1 in 5, nonprofit jobs are vacant right now. **CSI's vacancy rate is approximately 29%.**

Presently, as the State Departments are down staff, they are interviewing and hiring our staff as they are well trained and can advance their careers as the pay is at least 50% greater in most instances. This destabilizes the whole system and goes against all the research which shows that trained staff that have been in their roles for 2 years get better outcomes with our clients. If we can't retain our staff kids in this state suffer.

For children's providers, your commitment to increase funding by \$461 million is needed now more than ever as we are seeing an increase in the need for children's mental health services. As a provider serving Connecticut's children and families, I have been encouraged to see the legislature's focus on the children's mental health crisis this year. But I want to be clear: **There is no way to address the gaps in the children's mental health system without addressing the chronic underfunding of the existing services provided by nonprofits.**

The Governor's proposed budget for the Department of Children and Families funds new children's behavioral health services, for which we are thankful, but it does not provide support to existing services and programs that are struggling to keep up with the demand for services. We urge the Appropriations Committee to fight for funding for these programs by implementing The Alliance's plan for \$461 million.

The Governor's budget does propose several new programs for children for which we urge your support. They will be helpful to stop children from backing up the hospital system with Emergency Department and inpatient utilization. These increases are:

- Expand Mobile Crisis services to be available 24/7 using ARPA funding.
- Establish short-term urgent crisis services and sub-acute crisis stabilization units.

Children's mental health needs continues to increase, with providers seeing an unprecedented high volume of children and families with more acute illnesses – including those at high risk for suicide – as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on communities.

Community nonprofits are ready and able to support children and families struggling with mental health – but we need your help to ensure that current services are available and accessible.

Thank you,

Sherry Albert, Chief Operating Officer

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